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Serials Claims: Responsibilities, Responses, and Trade-Offs: A Program Sponsored by the ALCTS Serials Section Acquisitions Committee

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The popularity of this controversial topic was once again confirmed by a large audience at this three-hour program. Marifran Bustion, George Washington University, moderated a panel of six speakers who addressed the serials claims process from varying viewpoints — the librarian's, the publisher's, the distributor's, and the vendor's. Each presenter brought her own professional perspective to the issues, focusing on the communication chain and typical "breakdown" points.

Trisha Davis, Ohio State University Libraries, began the program by describing an ideal claims flow in which the process is handled in a simple, straightforward, successful manner. She then described reality, or a true picture of the claiming process and discussed some of the factors that influence how libraries handle claims. Davis talked about common problems with receiving and handling mail, the checkin process, identifying and verifying missing issues, notifying the publisher or vendor, and following up on unresolved claims. To understand why libraries do not handle claims in a standardized fashion, Davis reviewed the variables affecting the claims process: size and type of library, status of the materials budget, number and nature of subscriptions, number and level of staff, availability of automated systems, and access to publisher/vendor information. Davis concluded that regardless of the available resources, the key factor to effective and efficient claims processing is accurate and timely dispatch information. Without reliable publication and shipping information, even the most highly automated and well-staffed libraries will continue to claim unnecessarily. With adequate information, libraries with even minimal resources can work with their vendors and publishers to maximize their claiming efforts.

The next speaker was Sandra Gurshman of Readmore, Inc. who presented the observations of the subscription agent as someone in the unique position of being able to see the claims process involving a broad cross-section of libraries, publishers, ILS (integrated library systems) vendors, and even fulfillment houses. She began by presenting data from a Readmore study of claims and citing research results from Faxon, EBSCO, and Blackwell studies to support her observation that the majority of orders never require a claim. She stated that the best approach to claims is prevention — recognizing the points at which communication can break down, causing an unnecessary claim. Gurshman then described communication problems at each point in the claims process and cited timing as the most critical factor in both the prevention and handling of claims. She discussed several of the many factors that enter into the correctness of timing, such as renewals, subscription start dates, and adjustments to subscription terms. She described the agent's many responsibilities in claims processing, such as subscription and

payment verification, and defined the agent's role in this communication chain involving thousands of publishers and libraries. Gurshman concluded that the best approach to fast and efficient claiming is to communicate precise and accurate information about the issue being claimed. With the advent of electronic communications between the library's ILS system and the agent's claims database, the advantages in speed and efficiency of true online claiming will be realized.

Susan Malawski of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. talked about claims from the publisher's perspective. She presented results from a 1993 survey of first claims received from subscription agents. Of the 100 first claims surveyed, only 49% were "real claims" for missing issues claimed two to six months after mail date, 40% were "premature claims" for issues not yet published or claimed less than one month after mail date, and 11 % were "other" problems such as claims for issues that did not exist or were claimed more than six months after mail date. She then described what actions Wiley takes in response to claims by citing the results of a survey of 200 claims: issues were replaced for 41% of claims, the agent was notified of mail dates for 52% of claims, one claim was declared "beyond the claim period," and other information was supplied for the remaining 7% of claims. Malawski presented a thorough explanation of how Wiley provides dispatch data on individual issues using the International Committee for the EDI of Serials (ICEDIS) standard. Wiley uses the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) unique identifier for serial items, known as SICI, or Serial Item and Contribution Identifier. To the standard ISSN, chronology and enumeration data in the SICI, Wiley adds a predictive pattern and actual mail dates. Malawski encouraged standardized use of the Serials Industry Systems Advisory Committee (SISAC) barcode or symbol on journal covers, and SICI data in claims activity as a remedy to many claims issues.

The role of the fulfillment dealer was thoroughly discussed by Malena Silva and Donna Hauswald of Neodata Service. Silva began by providing a wide variety of statistics on Neodata, a fulfillment service that in 1992 included more than 90 million names in their active subscriber database and issued over 947 million mailing labels! She compared and contrasted the responsibilities of the publisher, the subscription agent, and the fulfillment center in handling subscriptions. She further defined the role of the fulfillment center in terms of their relationships with subscription agents, publishers, banks, circulation audit bureaus, and subscribers. Silva outlined the process of handling a subscription order from the point of order receipt to the mailing of issues. Hauswald then addressed the customer services issues involved in handling claims. She described how Neodata processes claims through telephone customer service and hardcopy flows and showed examples of their postcards, letter of correspondence, and even internal database records. Hauswald provided a detailed explanation of the matchcode format, a 17-character mailing label code used to identify a record in their database. For Neodata, the possible system breakdowns include bad timing of renewals, incorrect information from agents, payment problems, and address problems. Hauswald concluded by stressing the importance of communicating accurate information in problem resolution.

Linda Richter of MSUS/PALS represented the ILS vendor perspective. According to Richter, the purpose of an ILS automated claiming system is to serve the serials staff by making claiming more efficient, more accurate, and as a result, more effective. In the claiming process, the ILS should allow the library to: control the claims process to meet local needs, store frequency and publication patterns, store information needed by the agent and/or publisher to process a claim, alert the serials staff to a late or missing issue, assist in processing the claim report, create a claim containing all necessary information, generate subsequent claims as

needed, and prevent additional claims from being generated once the issue is checked in. There are serious difficulties with automated claiming functions because some titles are difficult to predict — records must be maintained accurately, and claims should be reviewed manually. Richter emphasized the importance of continually updating the system to incorporate new trends and standards, such as SICI and ANSI X12, with the goal of improving the accuracy and efficiency of the claiming process. She believes that electronic claiming and invoicing will improve the process by allowing more accurate claiming and providing faster response and resolution.

Tina Feick, representing both SISAC and Blackwell's Periodicals, completed the program with a detailed presentation on EDI and the standards to support it. She described the ANSI ASC X12 standard in use in the United States and the EDIFACT standard used in Europe. She defined the role of SISAC and ICEDIS, the two associations very involved with EDI. Feick also presented additional information on the SISAC bar code symbol and the SICI standard as a means of unique identification of a serial publication when referring to it in an EDI transaction. Feick stressed that EDI will not solve all claims problems, but that it will help enormously and that we need to get started. She discussed the variety of organizations within the library supply industry that are committed to the ASC X12 or the EDIFACT standard and where they are in the development and application process. Most subscription agents are ready to go today, some publishers are committed and using the standards, and some ILS vendors have committed to and are developing EDI capability. Feick provided an excellent conclusion to the program by emphasizing that a commitment to EDI standards will greatly reduce the volume of claims activity and eliminate much of the need for human intervention in the process, thus saving all parties the time and money that could be well spent on other activities.